Celio Falls, Oregon on the Columbia River c. 1957
Blanche Toner Dear and Tim Dear

Reflections

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This is Celilo Falls shortly before it disappeared beneath the waters of The Dalles Dam. Standing in the foreground is my grandmother, Blanche Toner Dear, holding her little Brownie camera. In fact, I believe I may still have that very camera today. Crouched behind her is my grandfather, Thurman Dear, who appears to be filming the scene with a movie camera. There is a remote possibility that this film still exists. It may have been copied decades ago onto an obsolete digital storage device that my father used to preserve family photographs and movies. I haven't yet figured out how to access it, but it remains one of the mysteries I'm determined to solve.

What moves me most about this photograph is that it captures the disappearance of an entire world. Celilo Falls was far more than a scenic landmark. For thousands of years, it was one of the greatest fishing sites, trading centers, and cultural crossroads in North America. Within a short time, the falls and the ancient gathering place surrounding them would vanish beneath the reservoir created by The Dalles Dam.

The family connections make the moment even more poignant. My grandmother's granduncle, Robert Smith—the older brother of her grandfather, John Lewis Smith—was a member of the Great Migration of 1843 and came down the Columbia River with the Applegate families. During that dangerous river journey, a boat overturned, drowning two young Applegate boys and an elderly family friend. Robert survived the trip and later married Susan Applegate, the daughter of Charles and Melinda Applegate, further binding the Smith and Applegate families together. Other members of my grandmother's family were also connected to later wagon migrations, including the opening of the southern route into Oregon, generally known as the Applegate Trail. Ten years later, in 1853, both my grandmother's and grandfather's families came west via the Elliott Cutoff—the Lost Wagon Train of 1853—and eventually settled in Douglas County, Oregon.

The connections did not end there. My grandfather's family expanded northward into Washington, helping establish some of the early ferry operations along the Columbia River. Relatives settled in Walla Walla, where members of the Baker family played an important role in the city's early commercial development. Both sides of my family became deeply connected to the Columbia and to the communities that grew along it.

My grandparents were therefore not simply tourists looking at Celilo Falls. Whether they understood every family connection or not, they were standing within a landscape threaded through more than a century of their own history—migration, settlement, river travel, ferries, commerce, marriage, and loss.

I sometimes wonder how much my grandmother knew about the history converging beneath her feet that day. More than a century after her granduncle came down the Columbia River through this place with the migration of 1843, she found herself standing there as Celilo approached its destruction. The expression on her face strikes me as one of shock and quiet disbelief. She seems completely absorbed by what she is witnessing, as though she understands that something immense and irreplaceable is about to be taken away.

What makes this photograph especially powerful is that it stands at the intersection of three histories. It records the destruction of an ancient Indigenous fishing, trading, and cultural center whose relationship with the river stretched back thousands of years. It recalls the arrival of Oregon Trail emigrants, including members of my own family, beginning with the Great Migration of 1843 and continuing with the Elliott Cutoff—the Lost Wagon Train of 1853. And it records the twentieth-century transformation of the Columbia through dam building and hydroelectric development, which permanently submerged one of the continent's most remarkable cultural landscapes.

Those histories cannot be treated as equal experiences. The emigrants passed through and settled in a place that had already been the homeland and cultural center of Native peoples for countless generations. The flooding of Celilo did not merely erase a geological wonder. It destroyed the physical heart of an enduring Indigenous economy, community, and gathering place. My grandparents' family connections to the river deepen the meaning of the photograph for me, but they also make the much older history—and the enormity of what was lost—impossible to ignore.

Pulling on these threads is heart-wrenching. The deeper I trace them, the more I realize that they are not separate stories. They cross and tighten around one another through generations, converging here in a single photograph: my grandmother staring toward the falls with the very Brownie camera I may still own today in her hands, and my grandfather crouched behind her, possibly recording the last living motion of Celilo on film.

That is why this image affects me so deeply. It is not simply a family photograph. It captures an extraordinary intersection of history: an ancient Native cultural center approaching the moment of its destruction, descendants of Oregon Trail families looking upon the same river corridor their relatives had traveled more than a century earlier, and the modern industrial transformation of the Columbia that would change the Northwest forever.

This photograph is one of the first four that my father had pulled from the family collection and placed in a separate album of what he apparently considered especially important pictures. As I continue sorting and restoring the collection, I'm carefully returning them to their proper family groups. There are a few more from this small group to share, and each one seems to tell an important part of our family's story.